

Contact: Brian Gorman
(206) 526-6613

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**FEDERAL AGENCY PROPOSES TO DESIGNATE HABITAT AS "CRITICAL" TO
SALMON IN THE NORTHWEST AND CALIFORNIA**

NOAA Fisheries today is releasing a proposal to designate specific areas of in-stream and estuarine habitat as "critical" to the conservation of 20 populations of federally protected salmon and steelhead in Washington, Oregon, Idaho and California. The proposal includes an assessment of the economic impacts associated with proposed designations and requires federal agencies to give special consideration to their activities when they take place within the designated areas.

"This proposal seeks to protect critical salmon habitats and meet the economic needs of the citizens of the Pacific Northwest and California," said Bill Hogarth, NOAA Fisheries administrator.

"This proposal emphasizes salmon restoration as a top priority, and recognizes the many voluntary conservation efforts and other important collaborative agreements that are already underway to achieve that goal," added Bob Lohn, NOAA Fisheries' Northwest regional administrator. "The designations are designed to identify the most beneficial biological habitat for salmon, while also defining the scope of the costs associated with designating certain areas," Lohn stated.

The Endangered Species Act requires the designation of critical habitat for a species listed for protection. The Act also requires the agency to fully consider the economic impact of such a designation. NOAA Fisheries withdrew a prior critical habitat rule in 2002 in response to legal concerns that the rule did not adequately consider economic impacts.

Significant federal funds have helped improve hundreds of miles of in-stream and estuarine habitat, boost juvenile fish survival and passage through hydroelectric dams through state-of-the-art technology, and reform hatchery and harvest practices, and provide incentives for salmon protection to local, state, tribal, private and other entities.

Since 2000, 13 of the 16 listed runs of salmon in the Pacific Northwest, and three of four of the Northern and Central California runs for which NOAA Fisheries has recent data have experienced significant improved numbers. Nearly all salmon populations have increased greatly and current levels are now well above ten-year averages.

The proposal also says NOAA Fisheries is considering whether to exclude certain areas from the critical habitat designation. The agency is seeking comments on these alternatives during the 60-day public comment period.

NOAA Fisheries is dedicated to providing and preserving the nation's living marine resources and their habitat through scientific research, management, and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries provides effective stewardship of these resources for the benefit of the nation, supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, and helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public.

The Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources.

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On the Web:

NOAA: <http://www.noaa.gov>

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